

Democratic Deficits of COVID-19 Crisis in Pakistan

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The 'lives versus livelihood' conundrum in Pakistan is emblematic of the difficulties that accompany the balancing of conflicting rights in transitioning democracies. From testing the ability of various tiers of the government machinery to work together to keeping the economy afloat as the country faced lockdowns, Pakistan deeply felt the onset of the burden of disease. The country's journey through the pandemic was shrouded in deep political contestations over power struggle between the provinces and the centre. As the crisis deepened in mid-2020, the social policies for pandemic response became the site for centralising authority; where trade-offs were made between fundamental rights and well-being of citizens to draw political mileage and cementing the narrative of the centre.

The effective response to the pandemic was heavily dependent on the ability of the various tiers of the government to work smoothly together. This raised the question of clear demarcation of responsibility and capacity of the structures to fulfil their responsibilities.

Under the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the federal government in Pakistan is relieved of the responsibility in many major sectors and provincial control was reasserted over the functions and institutions of local governments. With the aim to bring political decision-making closer to the common citizen, the move aimed at relegation of the domains of policymaking and service delivery to the provincial government, so that the point of contact for the social and economic affairs of the average citizen was the province.

Constitutional bodies like the [Council of Common Interests \(CCI\)](#) exist to resolve the disputes of power sharing between the federation and provinces and tackle the negative externalities of devolving certain divisions to the provinces by linking them both to the centre and to other provinces' policies. As a natural step for their effective functioning, the provinces also depend upon a fully functioning system of local governments for service delivery providing them with real time data and information. Despite constitutional requirements, [the local government structure](#) is non-existent in three out of the four provinces in Pakistan (in some cases for over a year now). The outbreak of COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated the deep-rooted structural, procedural, and ideological shortcomings of this system of devolution.

Rifts Between the Centre and the Provinces – Battle of Narratives:

The rising number of cases and deaths put immense pressure on the government to respond – immediately. As cases started mounting towards end of February 2020, to curb the spread of COVID-19, the country's entire political system comprising of federal and provincial authorities and national and provincial parliaments got intensely busy in crafting a holistic response to the crisis. However, the Prime Minister's [initial response](#) to the coronavirus was indecisive and weak. A lack of ownership of his approach by the provinces exposed the disconnect and lack of coordination between the federal and provincial governments. For instance, the Prime Minister initially publicly opposed the concept of lockdowns and declared it to be an anti-poor policy propagated by the elite to insulate themselves and which would destroy the economy. The Sindh provincial government, meanwhile, was asserting the need for a lockdown, and eventually announced one for the province, stating that saving lives were more important than the economy. The public debate was, hence, reduced to a 'lives vs. livelihoods' standoff.

The inability of the federal government to see eye-to-eye with the opposition-ruled province of Sindh on the direction and pace of the province's aggressive but publicly lauded steps to impose strict lockdown revealed the inability of the ruling parties to move past their differences and resulted in the politicisation of public health and safety fragmented governance. And it was not just Sindh. While PM Khan [announced](#) that there will not be any lockdown, the Punjab government decided to impose one, while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan only imposed a partial one.

Though health is a devolved area, it has been an arena for centre-province competition. [Historically](#), many public health initiatives were retained as national programmes, due to standardisation and global commitments issues. The National Programme on Malaria, Tuberculosis (TB), and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and the Extended Programme of Immunization (EPI), for example, both continue to be run from the capital. The pandemic only exasperated these federal-provincial differences as they got played in the form of a tug-and-pull between "rights vs livelihood" approach to deal with the crisis.

The [role of parliamentarians](#) in involving public health experts and medical practitioner is vital for the transparency and effectiveness of the health response against the pandemic. As public representatives and legislators, parliamentarians have the added responsibility of reaching out to their constituents for risk communication and public health messages. Hence, a crucial part of effective responsiveness to the pandemic depended upon the ability of the government to focus on empathic and consistent messaging, to present a united front, and to take charge of the narrative to dispel confusion. The nature and magnitude of the coronavirus pandemic especially necessitated the fact-based, coherent, and synchronized messaging by the government to take the public into confidence. The U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres went as far to call this the [pandemic of](#)

[misinformation](#) as the sheer volume of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation online crowded out the accurate information making it hard to distinguish between fact and fake content. Instead of taking control of the narrative, the constant rifts between politicians being played out live on prime time television and creation of new ad-hoc voluntary structures, left the government's response inconsistent and messaging [muddled](#).

Creation of New Structures to Fill in the Delivery Gaps

Like the rest of the world, the parliament in Pakistan was not able to perform its functions properly and was shut down in March 2020, on account of the pandemic and reconvened months afterwards when the federal parliament met in person to debate the corona virus response. Though the Speaker of the National Assembly formed a special parliamentary committee on the COVID-19 response, the committee met only a few times and parliamentary scrutiny did not make much headway due to the lack of consensus on the way forward.¹⁾ Being cognizant of the shortcomings, as a part of DRI's work on parliamentary oversight in Pakistan, DRI closely monitored the situation and provided technical input to parliamentarians on key policy areas of education, health, emergency cash transfers, social protection, economic relief, and food security aiming to strengthen parliamentary committees and secretariats, as well as supporting increased parliamentary participation to reclaim civic space.

When the virus seemed to be spiralling out of control in June 2020, the Federal Government had the option to utilise existing institutions for inter-provincial coordination to reach a consensus-based response to the emergency. Instead, a joint civilian-military body —the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) — was created to coordinate the national COVID-19 response. The [military's intelligence agencies](#) led in surveillance and contact tracing efforts. Many [high-ranking military officers](#) started playing an increasingly visible role and [enforced "smart" lockdowns](#) in hundreds of COVID hotspots across the country. This body was visualised as a ["nerve centre to synergise and articulate the unified national effort against COVID-19."](#)

While the NCOC tried to streamline communication from its own platform, there were various authorities giving conflicting messages, including ministers of the federal government, the courts, the clergy, news anchors, and so on. It did not help the situation that the [NCOC was established](#) without Cabinet approval at a meeting of the National Security Committee. To conceive a nationally cohesive and effective communications strategy, the narrative must have transparency and clarity, with the assistance and consensus of provincial governments and localised communication.

It is also pertinent to note that historically, Pakistan's previous successful dealing with national disasters in part was due to political stability; the authorities in question responded to flooding, earthquakes, and dengue outbreaks by leveraging their control over provincial administrations they had presided over for successive terms.

Many of these measures “[generally tended to rely on executive fiat rather than concrete legislative and institutional reforms](#).” Hence, in the ongoing pandemic response, as the [federal government had not acquired administrative longevity, the penchant for relying on executive fiat continuing to be the definitive trend was not surprising](#).

Recognizing the limitation of the existing systems to timely deliver and have a household level reach, the PM also formulated a coronavirus youth “[Tiger Force](#)” that would help the government disseminate its message. At its very inception, critics of the ruling party begun to term it as an unnecessary “parallel force” with no legal cover, when the scope of the Tiger Force was increased to also include price inspections, supervising utility stores, checking hoarding and helping with tree plantations. The outsourcing of such primary functions to unelected officials or volunteer forces is a further indication of the void left by local governments. At the lowest rung of the federation, any number of stopgap arrangements have been unable to serve as a substitute for a local government elected through a consistent framework and one which can offer robust service delivery. Simply put, the federal government does not have the capacity to manage a million volunteers on top of dealing with a pandemic which was being referred to as the first [social media infodemic](#) in the history of humankind.

The Absence of Local Governments

The [absence of clear insights](#), actionable data and implementable instructions for district administration accentuated the governance challenges faced by the country in its pandemic response. In effect, district commissioners and the PAS machinery under them have had near total control of managing the pandemic at the ground level. This may represent a more efficient model to some; one where decision-making is in the hands of a technocrat and administrator rather than, perhaps, an unqualified public representative. However, many decades of experimentation with such structures empirically reveal that power serves best when it is in the hands of people it is meant to serve.

[Local governments](#) could have made a qualitative difference in the collection of data from neighbourhood, street, and household levels for which there can be no better source than elected representatives who are also residents of the area. Local government officials as elected community representatives would also have enabled policy implementation in a democratic way as imposition by force is unsustainable and ineffective.

Coordination has smoothened over the many months since the NCOC began operations. However, the initial discord between the centre and at least one of its federating units sharply contrasted with its reliance on military-led executive institutions such as the NCOC and NDMA. It also throws up important questions regarding why disaster management authorities in Pakistan have almost exclusively been chaired by military personnel. Up until the NDMA Chairman’s retirement in December, he was heading both NDMA and ERRA simultaneously.

The fiscal crunch was coupled with a tense political environment in the country created by back and forth allegations of corruption. Since the start of the government's tenure, the opposition has consistently claimed that the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has been used as a tool for political victimisation where political dissent is silenced by implicating opponents with false charges and some bureaucrats associated with past administrations have been arrested. Several commentators noted the bureaucratic inertia caused by the reluctance of the executive branch to initiate projects for fear of undue scrutiny, especially in the early stages of the pandemic response before NDMA was designated as point of procurement. This was despite the relaxation of public procurement rules in case of emergencies. However, in Sindh, the ruling party's representatives accused the provincial government of corruption in pandemic spending, demanding an audit and threatening legal action.

These routine political standoffs acquired a particular urgency in the pandemic response. Instead of providing leadership during a frightening emergency, political polarisation escalated during the pandemic. These rifts become prominent in every major area of service delivery.

Conclusion

An [effective pandemic response strategy](#) had to be nuanced, data-driven, transparent,

robust and public health-led, demanding close scrutiny by public representatives to ensure equitable access to the system by all vulnerable groups. Rather than recognizing the need for a more collaborative consensus-based approach to governing, the pandemic response was driven more by the battle of narratives. The Prime Minister [stated](#) in June that the 18th Amendment had to be “reviewed,” and commented that the fiscal transfers from the federation to the provinces were driving the Federal Government's deficit.

At the beginning stages, when the coronavirus response fell to the provincial governments, there was a glimmer of hope that the crisis might actually help smoothen out the political fault lines and enable democratic consolidation in Pakistan. This did not happen. The pandemic opened the pandoras box of [largely unconstructive and inconclusive debate](#) on problems with provincial autonomy and the 18th Constitutional Amendment that granted it — with those critical of the law pushing back against the initial provincial control of the virus response. These skirmishes between the various tiers of government, narratives, and political fault lines, diluted the ability of the government to effectively deal with the crisis and resulted in the trade-offs between fundamental rights and well-being of citizens.

A coordinated response requires building a political consensus. Unilateral approach to a pandemic policy is impossible in a federation with a multi-party-political system, as the likelihood that one political party will monopolize political authority at all tiers of government is narrow. Pakistan's example shows, that attempts to override

and undermine federating units during national crisis leads to policy inertia, poor messaging, and inconsistent enforcement.

References

- Being cognizant of the shortcomings, as a part of DRI's work on parliamentary oversight in Pakistan, DRI closely monitored the situation and provided technical input to parliamentarians on key policy areas of education, health, emergency cash transfers, social protection, economic relief, and food security aiming to strengthen parliamentary committees and secretariats, as well as supporting increased parliamentary participation to reclaim civic space.

